

Scandals, Politicians, and the Decay of Government Trust

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In 1964, when roughly three quarters of all Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time, few could have predicted the protracted decay of trust in the United States government that would plague our country into the 21st century. Theories abound for this decline in trust, and yet, no single explanation seems to provide a perfect answer for it. Rather, it appears that a combination of factors account for this phenomenon. Using a quasi-experimental time series design, I demonstrate the potential a political scandal involving the president or a member of Congress has to erode trust in a significant way.

Not so long ago, the vast majority of Americans trusted the federal government. The same can not be said of Americans in recent years. In 1964, roughly seventy-five percent of all Americans said they trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time (Nye 1997). By 1974, only thirty-four percent of Americans said they trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time (Nye 1997). To be sure, something profound happened during that time; the positive sentiments Americans once had for their government turned into political cynicism.

Trust didn't bottom out in 1974 though. During the early 1990s trust plummeted to the lowest levels ever recorded (ANES 2007). Comparing the 1964 and 1996 National Election Studies (NES) trust surveys provides an alarming example of how sharply trust has declined. In 1964, not a single time did a majority of respondents to the NES trust survey choose the most negative response to any of the questions that were asked. However, the proportion of respondents choosing the most negative response rose by 28 percentage points between 1964 and 1996 (Hetherington 1998). Most discouraging of all, trust has not rebounded to the levels seen in the 1960s. Taking notice of this alarming trend, scholars have been trying to determine the reason Americans don't trust their government as much as they once used to. This endeavor has

proved challenging because not a single explanation seems to fully account for this shift. Rather, a combination of factors appear to be responsible. This paper will discuss one of these factors—political scandals. Using a quasi-experimental time series design, I will demonstrate the potential a political scandal involving the president or Congress has to erode trust in a significant way.

Specifically, I will examine the effect that major political scandals (involving the president or Congress) between 1972 and 2001 have had on government trust in the United States. The analysis will demonstrate whether or not a given scandal had a temporary or permanent effect on trust. Obviously, if a scandal does not have a temporary effect on trust it will not have a permanent effect, so the only scandals tested for a permanent effect will be the ones that demonstrated a significant immediate impact on trust. Furthermore, I will look at the factors which determine whether or not trust will rebound after a major political scandal. While political scandals are capable of having major effects on government trust, it is important to note that a number of other factors are also capable of influencing trust. To mention just a few, these include policy satisfaction, the mass media, incumbent and institutional assessments, political socialization, major events and wars, the economy, and social capital.

Why Trust Matters

Why is it important for Americans to trust their government? To best answer this question one must first look at the negative consequences that can stem from a lack of trust in government. Low levels of government trust can have a whole host of negative implications that ultimately threaten the institution of democracy in the United States. When levels of trust in the American government are low, the legitimacy of the American government is questioned, threatening the very ‘governability’ of America (Citrin and Green 1986). Those who foster

feelings of cynicism often avoid participating in politics (Miller 1974). Furthermore, those who feel alienated are also more likely to demand radical reforms during periods of discontent.

The notion of large numbers of citizens not participating in civic activities is perhaps the most critical of concerns. Democratic government requires participation by the masses, equality, the accountability of its leaders, and guaranteeing citizens' their constitutional rights. In order for these values to be present, political leaders must be trusted by the public. When just one of these fundamental democratic values is lacking, the institution of democracy is threatened. The stakes could not be higher (Miller 1974).

Miller defines political trust as the belief that government is performing in accordance with one's normative expectations of how it should operate. It is by no means a stretch then to assume that the actions of trusted leaders are more likely to be interpreted as legitimate than are those of leaders who are distrusted (Miller 1974). The consequences of citizens' discontent are more profound than one might expect as malaise is not solely directed at political authorities. Some scholars have hypothesized that while discontent may often initially be directed at officeholders, distrust can later be directed at institutions.

For example, evaluations of both elections and political parties are influenced by government trust. Nevertheless, public support tends to be greater for the institution of elections than for congressmen (Miller 1974). Hetherington also finds that there is a simultaneous relationship between trust and institutional assessments, and once lost, institutional support is more unlikely to recover than that of incumbents. Trust is not only a reflection of dissatisfaction with institutions and incumbents, but rather, a contributing factor to dissatisfaction in the first place (Hetherington 1998).

“Political cynicism is related to feelings of political inefficacy, to the belief that government is unresponsive, and to an apparent desire for structural and institutional reform (Miller 1974).” When distrust is high then, it is a powerful indication that United States citizens are dissatisfied with the performance of their government (Miller 1974). This goes back to the notion of distrust indicating that a government is falling short of democratic goals.

Today, the United States government is associated with scandal, waste, and intrusions on the private lives of Americans. Thirty years ago it was known for providing benefits and protections to its citizens (Hetherington 1998). When trust is low, incumbent approval is lower than it would be if trust was at moderate or high levels. This will inhibit the government’s ability to solve problems and when the government is unable to solve problems trust drops to even lower levels. Again, the simultaneous relationship between trust and institutional assessments should not be overlooked, because once lost, institutional support is more unlikely to recover than levels of support for officeholders.

Factors that cause Government Trust to Drop (and Rebound)

Some of the earliest and most important literature on this subject has been generated by a debate between Jack Citrin and Arthur H. Miller in 1974. Miller (1974) discusses political trust in attitudinal terms at length, emphasizing the psychological factors of distrust, while Jack Citrin (1974) downplays their effect, arguing that declining trust is simply a reflection of incumbent dissatisfaction. Miller suggests that trust in government is affected by both sociological and historical factors. Moreover, he goes on to say that government trust is influenced by race and ideology, and also asserts that policy dissatisfaction is a strong correlate of political cynicism.

Related to trust, economic discontent may go hand-in-hand with evaluations of a particular administration as well (Miller 1974).

Miller argues that the effect of partisan ideology on trust is limited and that other issues or factors can have an independent effect on political trust. While Miller finds that “trust in government is not just a function of presidential approval or party identification”, it is likewise true that policy dissatisfaction has its limitations. Additionally, political efficacy and government responsiveness have historically been correlated with political trust. To summarize, it is Miller’s contention that dissatisfaction in political leaders is not the primary cause of distrust (Miller 1974).

Like Miller, Citrin advances the hypothesis that a discrepancy between the policy preferences of everyday Americans and the positions advocated by the party controlling the presidency can have a negative impact on government trust. People tend to trust those they agree with. Citrin asserts that the most significant contribution of Miller’s “Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1974-70”, is its argument that the performance of political authorities and institutions determines their legitimacy (Citrin 1974). While Citrin does not overlook the impact of a person’s ideological orientation and policy preferences in evaluations of government, he argues that the primary source of public support or lack thereof for a political system are political events and experiences. Conversely, Miller attributes decays in aggregate level trust in government to unpopular centrist policies.

Miller’s argument that social background variables have strong effects on political trust prove weak as Citrin cites his evaluation of election studies conducted by the Survey Research Center and Center of Political Studies of the University of Michigan that show social background variables do not have strong correlations with political trust as measured by the trust in

government scale. The following example made by Citrin demonstrates this rather well; “in 1964, blacks were more trusting than whites; people earning less than \$5,000 a year were more trusting than those earning more than \$15,000; and manual workers were more trusting than businessman. In 1970, and again in 1972, these relationships were reversed.” Citrin demonstrates that the correlation between trust in government and party identification is weak. Furthermore, there is no evidence to support the notion that a change in the social composition of the American public can result in a decline in political trust (Citrin 1974).

Citrin also argues that the erosion of public trust in the 1970s was by no means a result of changing psychological disposition of Americans. Miller contends that government policies failing to meet the needs of Americans results in lower levels of trust. However, Citrin claims that this argument by Miller is weak as it relies on the assumption that “the trust in government scale measures alienation from the political regime rather than mere disapproval of incumbent leaders (Citrin 1974).” Moreover, Citrin contends that incumbent performance is a much stronger predictor. “To believe that the government wastes “a lot” of money, can be trusted to “do what is right only some of the time,” and includes “quite a few” people who are “crooked” or “don’t know what their doing” need not bespeak a deep-seated hostility toward the regime or community levels.” Essentially Citrin is suggesting that dissatisfaction is caused by and in turn directed primarily toward incumbent authorities (Citrin 1974).

In addition, Citrin finds that there is a strong correlation between support for the national administration and trust in government. One can find evidence of this by noticing that positive evaluations of the president and vice-president are more common among the politically trusting than the politically cynical. Citrin does however provide a disclaimer stating that trust in government often steadily declines during periods of fluctuations in presidential approval. For

example, during times when President Nixon was enjoying widespread support, mistrust of “government in general” was high. An explanation Citrin offers to explain this phenomenon is that, in response to an anti-McGovern vote, Nixon received more favorable ratings. An alternative explanation may be that this is simply a result of the well-established tradition of Americans’ voicing their cynicism towards politics, where cynical responses tend to be a matter of ritual (Citrin 1974).

The debate regarding the trust issue between Jack Citrin and Arthur Miller is undeniably an important one, as it gives us a good deal of insight into the factors that can and in some cases cannot influence government trust. In summation, Citrin comes to the conclusion that characteristics of the individual respondent are poor predictors of how much or little they will trust the government. This conclusion seems to be appropriate given that groups of those scoring low on the trust in government scale are quite heterogeneous. As mentioned in the article (in regards to low scorers), “they include “ritualistic cynics” and partisans of the “outs” as well as respondents who see no viable alternative to the incumbent authorities and reject the ongoing constitutional order (Citrin 1974).”

Regardless of these differences, it is still necessary to highlight the common ground Citrin and Miller share. They both agree that respondents who disapprove of government policies on salient issues are more likely to have cynical views toward the government. In other words, disagreeing with government policies can be a sufficient reason to judge incumbent authorities as untrustworthy or even incompetent. Moreover, to a certain extent Citrin concurs with Miller’s argument that attitudes, political events, and expectations are at least partially related to the erosion of government trust (Citrin 1974). The notion of politicians promising less and delivering more could be the simple solution to raising low levels of government trust. Miller has at least

one thing right, during prolonged periods of discontent political authorities will be closely scrutinized and levels of mistrust are likely to be high (Citrin 1974). It is interesting to note that neither Miller nor Citrin were able to pin down a single factor that will always have an across the board effect on trust.

Any meaningful discussion of trust in government must not only address the factors that cause it to decline, but also the factors that contribute to increases in trust. Both Citrin and Green discuss such factors, and I will provide a brief overview. First, filling a political seat with a new face, especially the Oval office, could result in higher levels of trust. Although, a new face by itself isn't enough. Miller illustrates this point well, "a replacement of political leaders with no subsequent improvement in the performance of government may generate a new spiral of political distrust (Miller 1974)." The implications of there being a lack of trust in government are profound, because when trust is low, the whole system of government is in jeopardy (Miller 1974). However, if the new person occupying the seat is doing his or her job effectively, trust might improve.

Hetherington (1998) argues that an improved economy, perceptions of government effectiveness, and higher levels of congressional approval each play an important role in trust increases. In regards to congressional approval improving trust, a good example of this can be found in 1994 when the new Republican majority Congress showed Americans that the political system can respond to citizen discontent. While it is encouraging that political leaders can take steps to increase trust, improvements are by no means permanent, as demonstrated by the fleeting increase of trust witnessed during the Reagan years (Hetherington 1998).

Theory

So why should scandals cause government trust to drop? The answer can be found by looking at the relationship between trust and government performance. Some of the most important factors that cause the public to trust or distrust the government are how well the president and Congress manage the economy, handle crime, and avoid scandal (Keele 2007). Broadly defined, trust is a basic evaluative orientation toward the government which is largely determined by how well the government is operating in relation to people's normative expectations (Hetherington 1998, Stokes 1962, Miller 1974). Given that trust is partially an evaluation of politicians, it responds immediately to any changes in government performance (Keele 2007). It is assumed that each citizen grants decision making power to an elected politician under the implicit contract that the representatives will accomplish goals of good policy, peace, and sound economic stewardship (Keele 2007).

A scandal involving the president or Congress is in conflict with this premise, and as I just alluded to, can ultimately cause trust to decline. Here a political scandal can be defined as a violation of expected conduct that discredits an incumbent or government institution. A political scandal is not only a major event that receives a great deal of media attention, but it is also a very strong indicator that our government, its actors, or both, are underperforming. Such obvious indicators of poor performance create conditions where cynicism can run high. The arguments made in this paper are predicated upon the relationship between trust and incumbent performance postulated by Citrin in 1974. Further, my findings that scandals can cause government trust to drop support Citrin's analysis of trust as he argues that the primary source of public support or lack thereof for a political system are political events and experiences, and particularly, incumbent performance (Citrin 1974).

Another question that warrants consideration (which I will test) is whether a given political scandal should have a temporary or permanent impact on trust. To say a scandal has a temporary effect means that trust dropped after a particular event, but in time it returned to previous levels. A scandal would have a permanent effect if trust levels were unable to rebound to previous levels. For example, a minor scandal involving a relatively unknown congressman should not cause trust to decline in a permanent way, if at all. Even a scandal of the Watergate variety might not be expected to have a permanent effect due to the array of factors that can impact trust. Nevertheless, one could assume that a major scandal (involving the president or a prominent member of Congress) would be capable of having a permanent effect on trust. Major scandals could have a permanent effect on trust because Americans might perceive the political process as being broken in the aftermath of the scandal, rather than simply seeing a few politicians as corrupt. Therefore, one of the crucial questions to ask after a scandal is whether ill sentiments are being directed at just the individuals involved in the scandal or the political process as a whole.

As my review of the arguments advanced by Citrin and Miller on trust demonstrates, a number of factors are capable of affecting government trust. It is my contention that political scandals are indeed every bit as capable of affecting trust as race, ideology, feelings towards current policies, sociological and historical factors, and levels of social capital and economic satisfaction or lack thereof. One of the reasons why scandals are important is rather straightforward; the largest declines in government trust have come after a significant political scandal.

When a scandal involves the president this point should be especially true. Another explanation which is not so obvious can be found by looking at what causes trust to rebound

after a low period. In the 1980s something happened that was both unexpected and without warning. The seemingly never ending slide in public confidence in America's political institutions and authorities came to a plateau (Citrin and Green 1986). The reason: Ronald Reagan had restored government trust by living up to Americans' expectations and avoiding scandal. Between 1980 and 1984 the proportion of the Americans believing that the government was being run 'for the benefit of all' surged from 21 to 39 percent (Citrin and Green 1986).

As Citrin and Green had found, "perceptions of presidential persona consistently have a significant independent influence on public confidence (Citrin and Green 1986)." Why should this not be the case for Congressman as well? Moreover, Americans have expectations of what the character of a president should be. So when a president such as Ronald Reagan comes along and meets these lofty expectations, there is great potential for a surge in trust. But what happens when a president or a congressman fails to meet these expectations? It seems the opposite can occur as trust may drop. A major political scandal certainly falls under this category.

As Citrin and Green put it, what many believed was a crisis of legitimacy for the American regime should have been described as a crisis of leadership as presidential style contributed to the decline in government trust throughout the 1970s. Specifically, there is a simultaneous relationship between trust and presidential evaluations, as well as trust and evaluations of Congress. Such a relationship would suggest that a political scandal would result in a decay of government trust for one or both of these groups. The forthcoming discussion of my analysis will help clarify these arguments.

Method for Measuring Trust after a Scandal

I test the impact that presidential and congressional scandals have on trust, and therefore, it is necessary to perform a time series analysis that allows me to determine the short-term reaction trust might have to government performance (Keele 2007). For this reason, quarterly data, rather than annual or biennial data, must be used. The data in this paper is from the archive at the Roper Center for Public Opinion and consists of about 200 administrations of nine different survey questions (Keele 2007). Using Stimson's (1991) "recursive dyadic dominance" algorithm, Keele (2007) generated a quarterly trust time series that will be used here.

This quarterly time series of trust starts in 1972 and ends in 2001, and covers the following scandals (with year and quarter included): Watergate, 1973:2-1974:3; Koreagate, 1977:1; ABSCAM, 1980:1; Iran-Contra Affair, 1986:3; Jim Wright Scandal, 1989:2; Keating 5, 1990:4; House Bank Scandal, 1991:3; White House Travel Office, 1993:2; Whitewater, 1994:2; Filegate, 1996:2. These scandals were chosen because not only did they involve the president or Congress, but also because they received national attention and the vast majority of Americans were likely to have had at least some exposure them. While a scandal involving a member of Congress might have been well known amongst the constituents in his or her district (causing distrust at the local level), the scandal would not impact aggregate trust levels if it did not receive national attention and therefore would not be useful testing here.

Data and Analysis

The quasi-experimental design used here is a means of assessing a discrete intervention (political scandal) on a social process (government trust). I perform two time series tests. First, I test whether a political scandal has an abrupt, temporary impact on trust. In the second, I test whether a scandal has a permanent effect. For each test, if the null hypothesis can be rejected, it can be inferred that the political scandal caused government trust to decline. In other words, the intervention has an impact on the time series (McDowall, McCleary, Meidinger, Hay, 1980).

For the purposes of this paper, political scandals will be the event tested. Scandals can be represented as a dummy variable or step function which will indicate the absence of the state prior to the event and the presence of the state after the event. This would be defined as

$$I_t = 0 \text{ prior to the event, where } I \text{ denotes an intervention} \\ = 1 \text{ thereafter.}$$

The impact of a political scandal, as represented by I_t , on the dependent variable Y_t (government trust), will be determined by the scandal selected by the analysis (McDowall, McCleary, Meidinger, Hay, 1980). The analysis in this paper will model two specific types of impacts: an abrupt, temporary impact, and a gradual, permanent impact. An abrupt, temporary pattern of impact would be defined as

$$I_t = 0 \text{ prior to the intervention} \\ = 1 \text{ during the intervention} \\ = 0 \text{ thereafter.}$$

Whereas, a gradual, permanent impact would be denoted as

$$I_t = 0 \text{ prior to the intervention} \\ = 1 \text{ during the intervention} \\ = 1 \text{ thereafter.}$$

The intervention model is

$$y_t = \delta y_{t-1} + \omega I_t.$$

An abrupt, temporary impact is determined by denoting the event with a pulse function instead of a step function. Although the pulse is often denoted with 'P', 'I' will replace it here to ensure consistency. A pulse function represents a temporary change, while a step function represents a permanent change (McDowall, McCleary, Meidinger, Hay, 1980). Prior to the political scandal, $I_t = 0$, and the y_t series is expected to be 0. But when the scandal occurs, $I_t = 1$. The intervention component represents a spike which begins at the moment of the intervention. "When δ is small, say $\delta = .1$, the post intervention series level decays rapidly back to its preintervention level. When δ is large, say $\delta = .9$, the spike decays slowly (McDowall, McCleary, Meidinger, Hay, 1980)." In order to reject the null hypothesis, ω must be statistically significant at either the .10 or .05 levels.

A gradual permanent impact is modeled by adding a lagged value of the time series to the intervention component (McDowall, McCleary, Meidinger, Hay, 1980). Again, the intervention model is

$$y_t = \delta y_{t-1} + \omega I_t.$$

In this model the δ parameter must be greater than 0 but less than unity; $0 < \delta < 1$. The bounds of system stability act as constraints on the δ parameter. The time series would be unstable if the δ parameter is not constrained to these bounds. It should be noted that if δ is not a fraction, the formula is considered invalid (McDowall, McCleary, Meidinger, Hay, 1980).

Prior to discussing the results of the analysis, I should clarify the relationship postulated here among scandals and government trust. In this essay I understand trust to be just one of a number of factors capable of causing government trust to decline. Although the results of my

analysis do not indicate that trust always drops in response to a political scandal, it is clear that in a number of instances between 1972 and 2001 a political scandal was more than capable of eroding government trust in a significant way.

It is worth re-emphasizing that levels of government trust are influenced by policy satisfaction, the mass media, incumbent and institutional assessments, political socialization, major events and wars, the economy, and social capital; not just trust. As a result of this reality, one should not expect trust to decline significantly after a minor political scandal if, for example, the economy is strong, incumbents in general are enjoying positive reviews, and social capital is high. Positive marks in these other areas will often cancel out the negative impact of a scandal, especially if it is not cataclysmic in nature. The results of my analysis support this assertion.

Results

It is clear that not all of the political scandals I have tested were created equally. Clearly the Watergate Scandal in 1972 and the Filegate Scandal in 1996 had different implications for a number of reasons, and should not be expected to affect trust in the same way (see Table 1 for these differences). The status of the players involved in a scandal, along with the severity of misconduct that is alleged are important variables to consider when trying to interpret the effect a political scandal has on trust.

Perhaps the most notorious and talked about political scandal in modern United States history is the Watergate scandal. In 1972, forty-eight percent of Americans said they trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time. By 1974, the year of President Nixon's resignation, only thirty-four percent of Americans said they trusted the federal government to do the right thing most of the time. The fourteen point drop of government trust between 1972 and

1974 is the largest two year drop ever recorded by the ANES. As astonishing as that fourteen point drop is, it would take another twenty-eight years for government trust to rebound to pre-1974 levels. This occurred in 2002, when, only after 9/11, did government trust climb up around 50 percent.

In the time series analysis I performed, trust dropped roughly 7 percentage points immediately after the Watergate Scandal (the largest immediate effect of all the scandals I tested). Taking into consideration the nature of this scandal, it is likely that the Watergate Scandal was the sole factor responsible for this immediate drop in trust. The results of the time series analysis do not indicate, however, that the Watergate scandal had a permanent effect on trust. This is somewhat encouraging. While it is alarming that trust did not rebound to pre-1972 levels until 2002, the data suggests that the Watergate scandal was not fully responsible for the low levels of government trust during this period. Other factors along with the Watergate scandal likely deserve blame.

The next largest quarterly drop in my analysis of trust occurred after the Keating Five scandal in 1990, when trust dropped a little more than 3 percentage points. Just one year earlier the Jim Wright scandal caused trust to drop 2.5 percentage points. Following the Keating Five scandal trust fell to 40 percent; the lowest trust had been since the early 1980s. Less than four years later, Americans once again adjusted their levels of trust in the government following the Whitewater scandal in 1994. Trust only dropped roughly 2 percentage points following this scandal, but this decline may have been even more pronounced if trust wasn't already so low in the first place. Trust was just barely above 30 percent after Whitewater, marking the lowest levels of trust ever recorded.

Three scandals in five years is by no means an indication of satisfactory government performance, and that trust suffered as a result should not be surprising. Despite these indicators of poor government performance, trust did rebound rather quickly. The 1994 mid-term elections appeared to be the remedy for low levels of trust. The Republicans won a majority of seats in Congress, showing that government can indeed respond to its citizens. Soon after the 1994 mid-term elections trust began climbing and continued to climb throughout the 1990s.

The ABSCAM scandal in 1980 is noteworthy for a number of reasons as well. It caused trust to drop just over 2 percentage points, but like the Whitewater scandal 14 years earlier, it resulted in trust reaching the kind of severely low levels seen in aftermath of the Watergate scandal, when trust levels were around 35 percent. This near record nadir didn't last long though. After Ronald Reagan entered the Oval Office trust began to climb. It appeared as though President Reagan had restored trust. As Miller (1974) argued, "filling a political seat with a new face, especially the Oval office, could result in higher levels of trust." This change of direction in America, along with President Reagan's solid job performance clearly gave many Americans a reason to begin trusting their government again.

The results of my time series analysis indicate that of these five scandals that impacted trust in the short-term, only the Keating Five scandal had a permanent effect on trust as indicated in Table 2. Given the host of factors that can influence trust, it is reasonable to assume that the likelihood of any single factor (in this case scandals) having a permanent impact on trust would be small. That the Keating Five scandal would be responsible for causing a 2 percent permanent decay of trust, and that the Watergate scandal did not have a discernable permanent effect deserves attention. It is quite likely that the Keating Five scandal is nothing more than a statistical outlier that happened by chance, and other factors contributed to the permanent effect

that is associated with it. After the Watergate scandal it took trust over thirty years to rebound to pre-1972 levels. It is clear, however, that the Watergate scandal was not solely responsible for this, although it may have indeed acted in concert with other factors to keep trust from improving.

The Koreagate scandal (1977), Iran-Contra Affair (1986), House Bank scandal (1991), White House Travel Office scandal (1993), and Filegate scandal (1996) each did not have a negative impact on government trust. The fact that these scandals did not cause trust to decline allows us to draw some important inferences about the relationship between political scandals and trust. First, as I alluded to earlier, trust will not always decline simply because there is a scandal in the news. The seriousness of the scandal matters. The dynamics involved in the Filegate scandal or White House Travel Office scandal differ starkly from the Watergate scandal, and not surprisingly, trust was affected in different ways. Second, the political climate prior to a scandal must be taken into consideration. While the Iran-Contra Affair was clearly a major scandal given President Reagan's involvement in it, the other factors I have previously mentioned which are capable of impacting trust most likely offset any negative impact the scandal itself had.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of quarterly trust levels from 1972-2001 and Table 1 shows how many percentage points trust dropped the quarter of a given political scandal. After determining which scandals had a short-term impact on trust, I proceeded to test whether or not these scandals had a permanent effect; these results can be found in Table 2.

Figure 1 **Quarterly Trust in Government,**
1972-2001

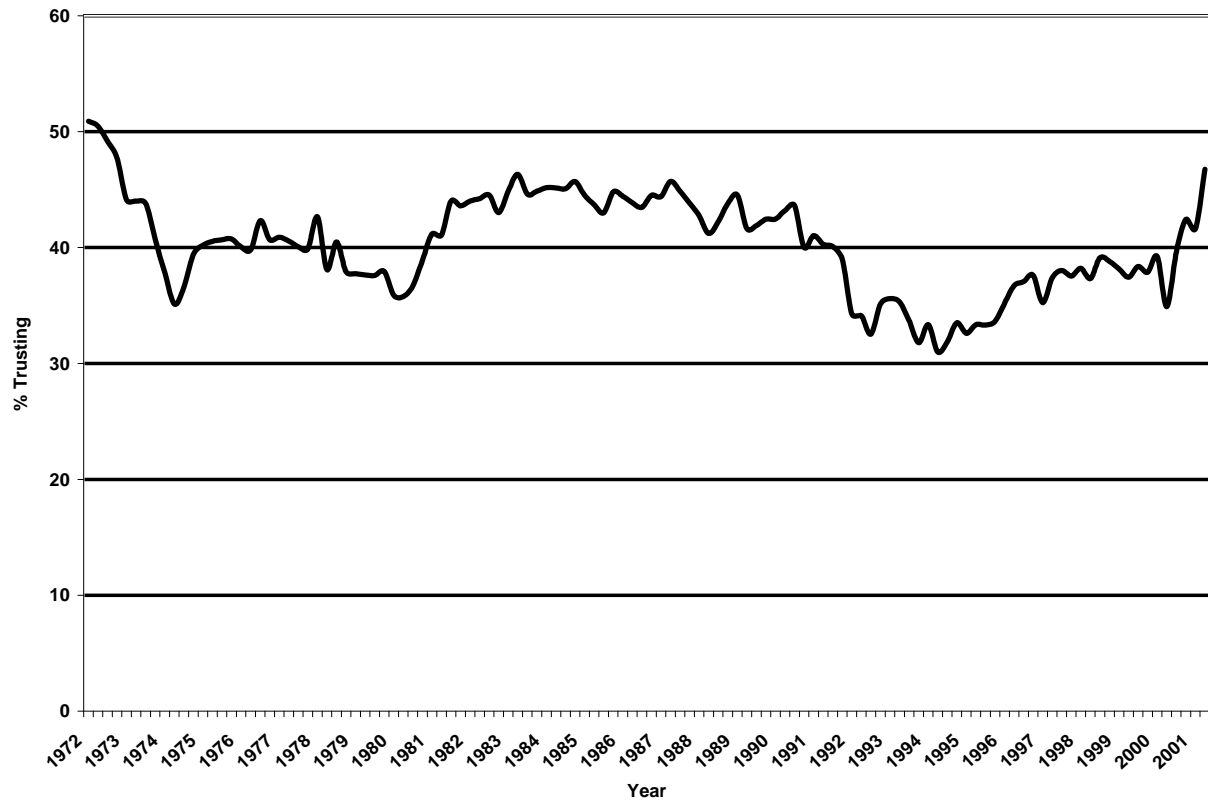


Table 1 Trust in Government immediately after Political Scandal

| Scandal (Year: Quarter) | % Drop in Government Trust | Statistical Significance |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Watergate (1973:2-1974:3) | -7.26 | *.04 |
| Koreagate (1977:1) | -.24 | .44 |
| ABSCAM (1980:1) | -2.24 | ** .09 |
| Iran-Contra (1986:3) | .44 | .30 |
| Jim Wright (1989:2) | -2.48 | ** .07 |
| Keating Five (1990:4) | -3.25 | *.03 |
| House Bank (1991:3) | -.15 | .47 |
| House Post Office (1992:2) | -7.20 | .34 |
| White House Travel Office (1993:2) | -6.70 | .34 |
| Whitewater (1994:2) | -1.58 | ** .09 |
| Filegate (1996:2) | 1.12 | .25 |

Note: *p < .05, **p < .10
Data from 1972 to 2001

Table 2 **Political Scandals and Permanent Impact on Trust**

| Scandal (Year: Quarter) | % Permanent Drop in Government Trust | Statistical Significance |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Watergate (1973:2-1974:3) | -.73 | .23 |
| ABSCAM (1980:1) | 1.11 | .01 |
| Jim Wright (1989:2) | - .42 | .27 |
| Keating Five (1990:4) | -1.91 | *.01 |
| Whitewater (1994:2) | .77 | .06 |

Note: *p < .05, **p < .10
Data from 1972 to 2001

Conclusion

The high levels of government trust enjoyed in the 1950s and 1960s appear to be just that; a thing of the past. During the 1950s and 1960s trust was almost always around 60 percentage points or more. However, seeing lagging trust levels below 40 percentage points has been alarmingly common ever since the early 1970s. These low levels of trust do not come without negative consequences either. Today, the United States government is associated with scandal, waste, and intrusions on the private lives of Americans. Thirty years ago it was known for providing benefits and protections to its citizens (Hetherington 1998).

As Citrin and Green (1986) found, when levels of trust in the American government are low, the legitimacy of the American government is questioned, threatening the very ‘governability’ of America. Those who foster feelings of cynicism often avoid participating in politics (Miller 1974). Furthermore, those who feel alienated are also more likely to demand radical reforms during periods of discontent. When, on the other hand, social capital is high and positive sentiments to the United States government are positive, it creates an environment where policymakers can succeed.

Some of the most important factors that cause the public to trust or distrust the government are how well the president and Congress manage the economy, handle crime, and avoid scandal (Keele 2007). Restated, evaluations of government performance go hand in hand with trust. Above all else, this essay attempts to convince its readers of two things. First, trust matters. Second, a political scandal involving the president or Congress is capable of impacting trust in a negative way.

As I mentioned earlier, it is not my contention that political scandals are the only factor capable of causing trust to decline. Nor have I demonstrated or argued that scandals are even the most important factor. Rather, I have shown that a political scandal is one of many factors that can impact trust. Using a quasi-experimental time series design, I tested eleven political scandals that occurred between 1972 and 2001. Five of these scandals caused an immediate erosion of trust. Because quarterly data was used, it is unlikely that some other factor or event was responsible for the declines in trust recorded after the given scandals.

While the absence of political scandals does not guarantee that trust will necessarily be high, it is certainly something that can help keep trust from getting too low. Trust levels have fluctuated a number of times since the NES surveys began measuring government trust in 1958.

It is interesting to note, though, that only two times between 1972 and 2001 has trust slipped badly and been unable to recover for awhile. In both instances, a political scandal was the impetus for the decay. The first major decline in trust occurred in 1972 after the Watergate scandal, and the second drop, occurred in 1990 after the Keating Five scandal. It is difficult to say whether these scandals were entirely responsible for the aforementioned declines, yet, it is quite clear that at a minimum, these two scandals deserve blame for creating an environment where trust was in a position to plummet to record lows.

Since government trust has only been recorded for the last 50 years or so, there have been a limited number of scandals to test in this analysis. But, if the past few decades are any indication, one thing is certain; political scandals will continue to emerge with frequency in the coming years, and the list of testable scandals will get bigger, giving us an even clearer idea of precisely what kind of impact political scandals have on government trust in the United States. Unless of course politicians begin to learn from the past mistakes of their brethren and decide to steer clear of controversy and scandal—I didn't think so either.

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